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AUTHOR Sundberg, Lori L.
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ABSTRACT

In comparing local unemployment rates with enrollments over a 20-year period at Carl Sandburg College (CSC, Illinois), it was discovered that there is only a moderate correlation between unemployment and vocational, occupational, and GED enrollments, and no correlation at all with enrollments in baccalaureate or transfer programs. These results suggest that, against popular belief, community colleges need not suffer declines in enrollment during periods of low unemployment. Colleges must simply shift their efforts toward marketing those services and programs still in demand. For example, CSC has focused on aggressively recruiting high school seniors, people who are minimally affected by unemployment rates when making their college decisions. The college also has initiated new vocational and occupational programs that are in high demand in the district. These programs admit people who have lost their jobs and help them to increase their earning potential and obtain employment after graduation. As a result of its efforts, CSC has seen a 15% increase in enrollment, while other Illinois community college enrollments have declined. This analysis illustrates the need to accurately determine how unemployment rates affect enrollment at specific schools, and how this information can be used to a school's advantage in its marketing endeavors. (YKH)

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How Community Colleges Can Increase Enrollments During Times of Low Unemployment

By: Lori L. Sundberg
Carl Sandburg College
2232 S. Lake Storey Rd.
Galesburg, IL 61401
309-341-5242

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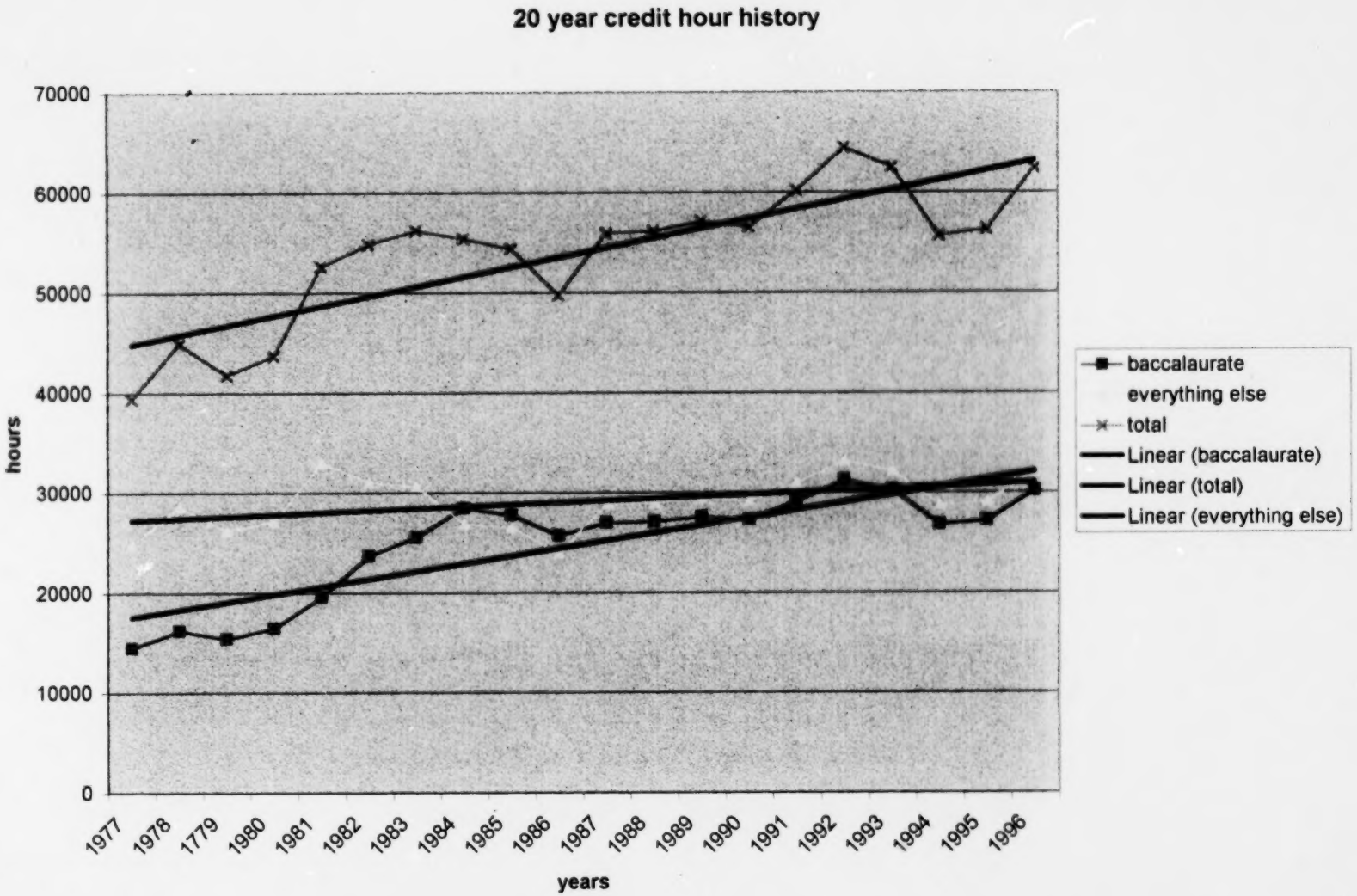
It is a widely held belief that low unemployment rates gives rise to lower enrollments for community colleges. The theory has held that during good economic times community colleges typically struggle with maintaining enrollments, because with a strong economy there is no need for people to attend school for additional training or skill enhancements. However, in analyzing unemployment rates with enrollments at Carl Sandburg College over a 20-year period, there is in fact, only a moderate correlation between enrollments in vocational, occupational, and GED and unemployment. And more importantly, enrollments in baccalaureate or transfer programs are entirely *uncorrelated* to unemployment rates. Understanding the differences in enrollment trends during times of either high or low unemployment is crucial for a community college, because it can allow the college to develop a competitive edge by marketing those areas still demanded more effectively.

Quoting the 1996-97 *American Association of Community College Annual Report* for Illinois "One reason for the loss of students is an ever-improving state economy." With more effective and specific marketing, community colleges do not have to suffer declines in enrollments during low unemployment times, but rather can shift its efforts to those markets still being demanded. As an example, since 1994, Carl Sandburg College has enjoyed a 15 percent increase in enrollments, while at the same time, community colleges across the state of Illinois, where Carl Sandburg College is located, have suffered an overall 6 percent decline. Carl Sandburg College has focused on more aggressively targeting high school seniors who are not affected by unemployment rates when making their college decisions, and by initiating new vocational or occupational programs that are highly demanded in the district. The next two charts illustrate overall unemployment rates and the corresponding trend line, and credit hour enrollments at Carl Sandburg College with trend lines.



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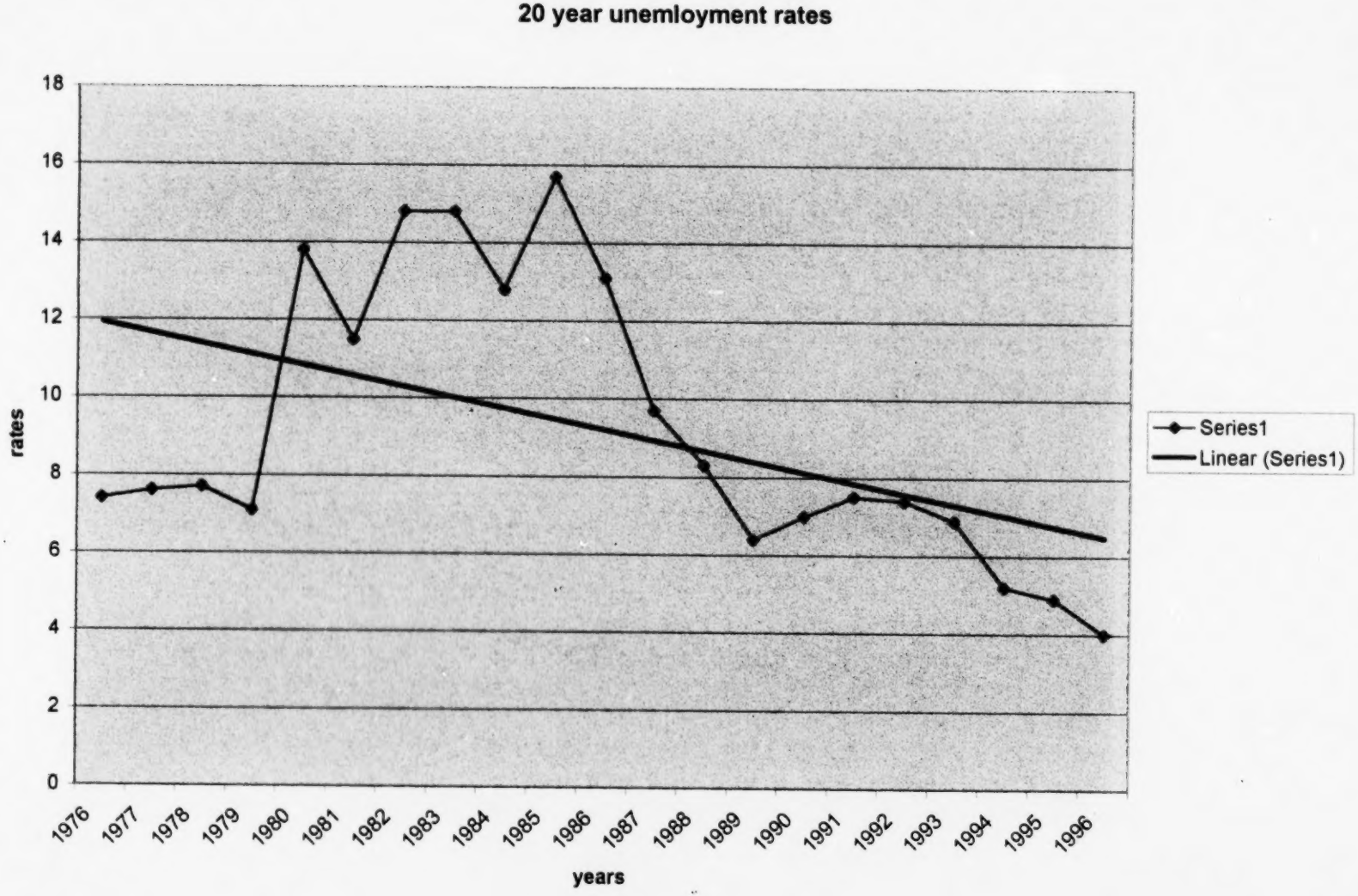

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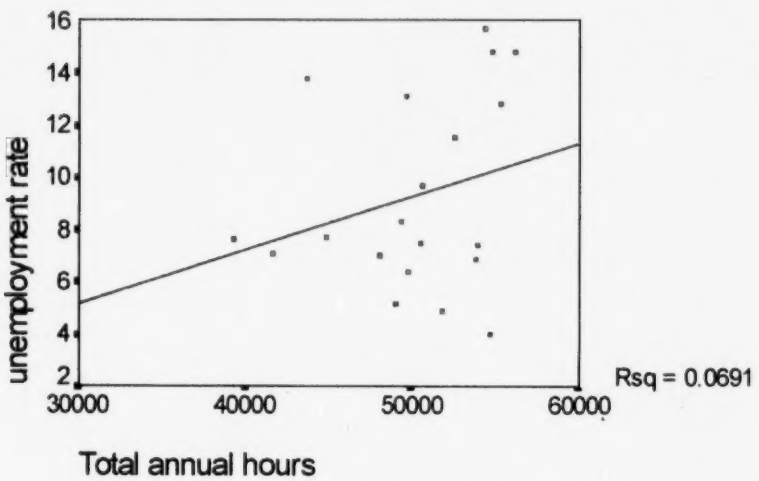
To support the theory that low unemployment rates do not have to drive down community college enrollments, 20 years of credit-hour-data were regressed against unemployment data. For Carl Sandburg College, there is a low correlation between total credit hour enrollment and unemployment rates. The following statistics and graph better illustrates this situation.

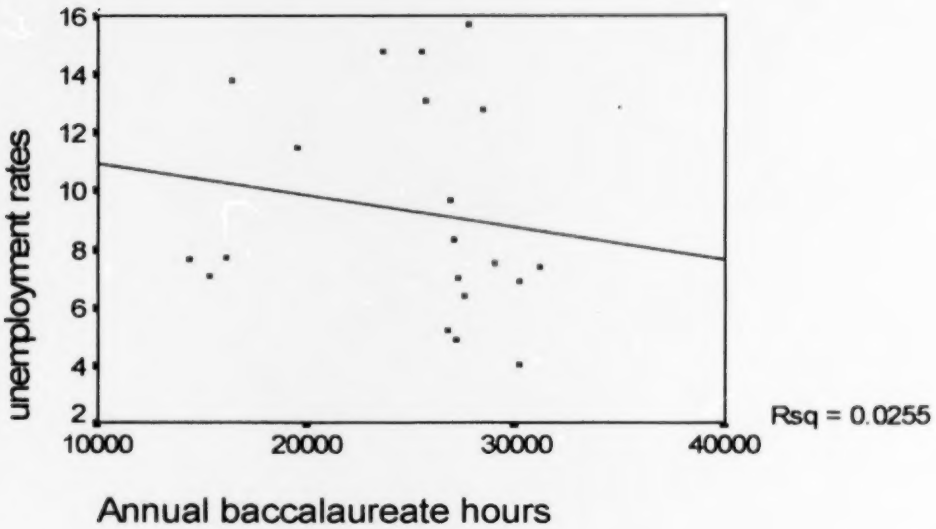
Multiple R	.26282
R Square	.06908
Adjusted R Square	.01736
Durbin Watson	.54894
Sig T	.2629



A more specific examination of credit hours was conducted by regressing baccalaureate hours only with unemployment rates. As is evident from the following statistics and graph, there is no correlation with baccalaureate hours.

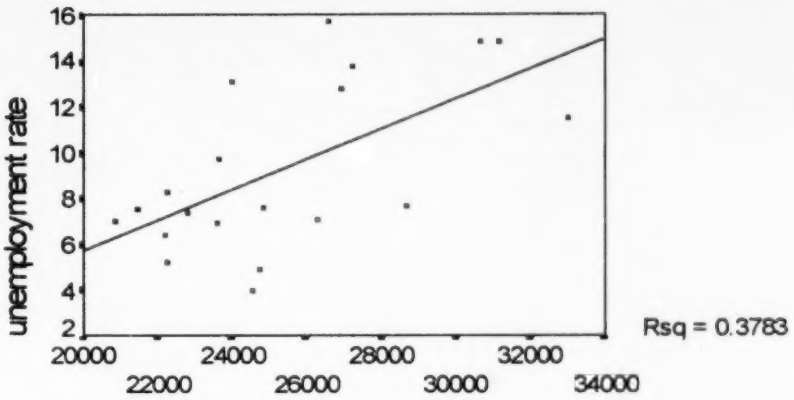
Multiple R	.15974

R Square	.02552
Adjusted R Square	-.02862
Durbin Watson	.16988
Sig T	.5011



The final segment to examine is other types of enrollments in the College with the exception of baccalaureate hours which would include vocational, GED, and occupational. This is the area for Carl Sandburg College that is most affected by unemployment rates. The following statistics and graph better illustrates the relationship.

Multiple R	.61503
R Square	.37826
Adjusted R Square	.34372
Durbin Watson	.88303
Sig T	.0039



Clearly, a widely held belief about community college enrollment and unemployment rates is, in fact, true only for a particular segment of its enrollment. Baccalaureate students are largely unaffected by unemployment, and therefore will still attend college somewhere upon graduation from high school.

The question then becomes how to effectively market the college knowing that new high school graduates will not be affected and that vocational, occupational, and GED students are somewhat affected. Carl Sandburg College began by targeting high school graduates in the district, and aggressively recruiting its share of the market. In 1990-1991 Carl Sandburg College recruited 29 percent of the total high school students who were college bound. In 1996-1997 the College recruited 37 percent of high school students who were college bound. In actual numbers this difference represents a 42 percent increase in the number of high newly graduated high school students attending Carl Sandburg College.

In the area of vocational, occupational, and GED, the College found that when people were steadily employed they had little incentive to attend college classes, and yet if they became unemployed they would attend the college for re-training. The college therefore decided to

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research those jobs that were most in demand in the district, and try to implement programs in those areas. By bringing on programs that were highly demanded, those persons who had lost their jobs could enroll at the College, and become gainfully employed upon graduation.

Bringing on these highly demanded programs also provided those people who were under-employed, another segment of the College district, to have an opportunity to increase their earning capabilities. In the Carl Sandburg College district, those new programs implemented include Mortuary Science, Emergency Medical Technician, Paramedic, and Desktop Publishing to name a few. By implementing programs with a high need in the district, those persons who were unemployed or under-unemployed were more inclined to enroll at the College. Consequently, Carl Sandburg College has not experienced the decline in enrollments that other community colleges suffer during years of low unemployment.

This analysis illustrates the need to accurately determine how unemployment rates and enrollment can be analyzed to make better use of the marketing efforts of the college. Further, it proves widely held beliefs do not necessarily hold true for every college or for every market segment.